

#194 JOE MESSNER: USS *AVOCET*

John Martini (JM): This is a Pearl Harbor . . .

(Conversation off-mike.)

JM: Okay, this is a Pearl Harbor audio, video history tape. We're interviewing Mr. Joe Messner. Joe Messner was a Radioman Third Class aboard the mine sweeper, USS *AVOCET*.

Joe Messner (JO): No, seaplane tender.

JM: Seaplane tender, USS *AVOCET* -- he'd been converted -- on December 7, 1941. Today's date is December 3, 1991, approximately 4:30 in the afternoon. We're at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel in Honolulu. My name is John A. Martini. At the time of the December 7 attack, Mr. Messner was nineteen years of age, today he's sixty-nine. This tape is produced in conjunction with the National Park Service, USS *ARIZONA* Memorial, and KHET television, Honolulu.

And, Mr. Messner, the first question that I ask is how did you get into the U.S. Navy?

JO: Well, it's kind of interesting in the fact that I graduated with honors from Allegheny High School on the north side of Pittsburgh. But at that time, it was the tail end of the depression and there simply weren't any jobs. A wonderful opportunity presented itself, called the V3 program. That meant that you could sign up for four years into the Navy reserve, attend a radio school for four months, then join the fleet for one year, after which you would retire back to civilian life and attend monthly meetings, or bi-monthly meetings. But while I was at the radio school, President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared a national emergency to exist. Those of us who were in the service at that time were forced to remain there. So I continued, instead of going after one year, back into civilian life, I was ordered to stay in for the duration, whatever that meant.

JM: (Laughs) When did you join the *AVOCET* at Pearl Harbor?

JO: You want the whole story?

JM: Yeah . . .

JO: This is really fascinating because it gives you an idea how my life has been and how it began in the military. While I was at radio school, I was a pretty, I turned out to be a pretty good operator and they asked for volunteers to serve in PBY Catalina's, Tall Flying Boats. Two engines, now, big scout planes. And sixty of us were chosen because of our extremely good health. I was just a slender fellow at the time. I only weighed about a hundred and twenty-five pounds. And I was wiry and tough. My grades were good and I learned how to copy and send the international code very well.

So sixty of us were chosen to be sent to the 14th Naval District, which is in Hawaii. And we were sent to San Diego, first of all. But at San Diego, we were divided in half. My name, Messner, was the last of the first group, the thirtieth man. When we got down here to Pearl Harbor, we were at the Ford Island Naval Air Station, and on the third day there, they called us to

quarters and muster, and the bosun mate called out our names, five men at a time, or so. And one man was left standing there. And he says, "You must be . . . Messner, J. H. Messner."

I says, "Yes sir."

He says, "Well, the squadron's filled up now." He says, "You're going to be on temporary duty aboard a seaplane tender, the *AVOCET*."

I didn't know what that is. He says, "Don't worry about it kid. They'll bring you up here shortly. Somebody's going to flunk out and these men have to train and they're going to be in PBYs as radio operators."

JM: When was this?

JO: This was in June of 1941, six months.

JM: Six months.

JO: Yeah, ahead of things. It turns out that you're looking at the sole survivor. This is the story I was describing to you. After they were trained, they were sent to Philippines, Wake Island, and Midway. You are familiar with what happened at those places?

JM: All overrun.

JO: All overrun, killed, captured or missing. You're looking at the sole survivor. And I constantly had a great desire to be pulled up because I was put aboard a little ship that looked like a tugboat.

JM: Yeah.

JO: I had seen all these battleships around with their guns sticking up and I was looking for adventure. I thought I was betrayed. I was supposed to be in where the action was. A mine --- or at least on a big fighting ship. Here I was in on a little seaplane tender. But eventually, you'll see how the story evolves, that the grand, brave, fighting little *AVOCET*, went amongst these big battleships were laying on the bottom, burning, exploding, and we put fires out.

JM: What was the . . . so the *AVOCET* didn't exactly meet your ideas of a gallant Navy career for a . . .

JO: Paint peeling off, old time Navy guys in dungarees. This was the old Navy.

JM: Now, you were officially assigned as a Radioman Third Class.

JO: Radioman Third Class, right fresh out of the school.

JM: What was your battle station?

JO: My battle station proved to be on the second deck outside of the captain's cabin, just after the gun deck and my battle station was at a David winch, which I would pull up boxes of ammunition from down in the magazine,

bring them, swing them in, with a big knife, cut several lines that had a metal cover over where three long anti-aircraft shells were contained.

JM: Uh-huh.

JO: I would wipe them off because they had a heavy covering of protective petroleum jelly type of things. I would clean that off, run up, lay 'em on my knee, and the gunner's mate would spin the fuse to explode it a certain height, or timing device, explode after a certain amount of time after it left the gun. And that meant also a certain amount of altitude.

JM: If the --- of course, the fiftieth anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor is coming up, what was happening that morning? When you got up, what was your duty? Before anything broke, what were you doing that morning?

JO: Well, I had planned to go to Catholic mass that morning, go to church.

JM: Uh-huh.

JO: Usually held around eight o'clock. I was dressed. I had a white uniform on and white jumper, with skivvy shirt underneath and a white hat. I was up early and I went up to the radio shack to kill a few minutes before I went over onto the beach, because they had Catholic mass over, right on the, in the open air, on Ford Island.

JM: Where was the *AVOCET* tied up?

JO: At the Ford Island Naval Air Station dock, right in front of the administration building. Bow out to the channel, one hundred yards from the bow of the battleship *CALIFORNIA*. Just through the first one on the side towards the entrance of the channel, along Battleship Row.

JM: When did you first start noticing things were different?

JO: Well, it began . . . we were talking with the door of the radio shack open, and we heard an unusual sound, a rather large number of airplane engines on a Sunday morning, which was most uncommon. You didn't --- it was irreverent, you might say, to make a lot of noise on a Sunday morning. The church pennant flew above the American flag. You had to be quiet and reverent. It turns out I stepped out of the radio shack to look up and see what was going on, and I noticed a plane in a rather steep dive, and it had fixed landing gears. An unusual shape, because I don't remember our, any of our planes like -- but it didn't dawn on me that it wasn't an American plane, at the time. But when he dropped something, I mistakenly thought it was part of his plane, like a landing gear or something. But what he dropped struck a huge air hangar on the Ford Island, where PBYs were maintained.

JM: So that would have been one of the very first . . .

JO: It was the very first bomb that started World War II.

JM: When it went, when you saw the explosion, what did you think? Bomb or accident?

JO: Well, then I was, of course, I was taken aback by it and startled. And I noticed there were other planes, there was quite a few by now. And they had a different shape and they had a different sound, and they had different colors. Some of them were very light gray or even not painted at all, just natural metal or painted a light gray, and they had the big orange balls, the Japan on the side under the wings, and so forth. And I was hard pressed -- my mind, rather, had a very difficult time comprehending that this was actually happening, and that they were, we were under -- where did they come from? You know, what is happening here? And next thing I knew, the bombs began to fall very rapidly. They were using sixteen inch armor piercing shells with fins on it, from the battleships, that penetrated ten inches of armor plate, on the decks of these battleships, and exploded several decks down.

JM: Go back for a second to when you saw the round, some called it the "meatball," the HO-NO-MU-RA. Did --- had you been trained? -- did you implant it in --- did you know that was a Japanese emblem?

JO: Oh yes. It was --- we were aware of that. We expected some warlike action to begin. Some were mostly in the Far East, Philippine Islands, Indochina, but no one could imagine that they could possibly come across the great expanse of the Pacific without being detected. That was totally mind boggling, that anything like that could happen. We did have Wake Island. We had Midway. We had PBYs on patrol. And ships in the shipping lanes, and so forth. But they came in along the Aleutian Islands and straight down in, just as General Mitchell had described it would be possible to do.

JM: *AVOCET* was everywhere during the attack. How did it happen you guys got there so fast? Did you get swept, or . . .

JO: Well, first of all, I ran around to the starboard side, where the captain's cabin was and I pounded on his door, then I did the unthinkable. I went into the captain's cabin, grabbed a hold of him and shook him. He was in his skivvies. He had his T-shirt and white underpants. And I shook him and says, "Captain, the Japanese are bombing Pearl Harbor!"

Well, he was only half-awake and he jumped out of his big bunk and he comprehended very quickly, and he said to me, "Sound general quarters."

So I yelled up to the bridge when I got outside and I ran down below and alerted the crew in my compartment. There were twelve men sleeping, but there were quite a few men, about a third of the crew were on weekend liberty, or on, over on the beach, see, in Honolulu.

JM: Yeah.

JO: So we were undermanned. I went down below and started shaking people and telling them to wake up, the Japanese are bombing. But nobody believed me. They were going to punch me, kick me, or shoot me.

JM: (Laughs) Uh-huh?

JO: Yeah. They were mad, because Sunday mornings, if you didn't go to church, you slept in. That was the one day you could sleep in.

JM: It was --- did they think you were . . .

J0: Well, then the bomb hit in the water, not too far away. It lifted my ship almost of the water.

JM: Uh-huh.

J0: And then, the noise became quite loud and they began to believe me. I grabbed their clothes and began running up the ladders, you know, into their battle stations. And I went to mine, which was on the starboard side, on the gun deck and I began pulling boxes of shells up and loading them into the three- inch guns. We did hit -- because we fired so early, we were one of the very first, if not the first, to begin firing. Captain was not hesitant at all. He didn't wait until first somebody give the command. He said --- it was commence firing and we started shooting. And you could plainly see what you were doing at that time, because there were no other puffs and no other action, because then we saw this one get hit, that we had fired at. Tore off his wing and he curled and did a sort of a loop and crashed in with a live torpedo, into the naval hospital and he blew it up. We understand later that a rather large number of our men were killed because of that.

But we did bring one of them down. We also were firing our twenty, thirty caliber machine guns directly across the, from one side of the channel to the other. And while the torpedo planes were coming in very low along the water, we were trying to stop them, but we were raking the decks of the ships on the other side.

JM: Thirty-caliber machine gun fire from you guys?

J0: Well, you see, when you go to general quarters on a Navy ship, most of the time, or on the large ships, you go in and down, or in somewhere. Gun turrets, below decks, the office, the fire room, engine room, or somewhere, but most of the time it's in and down. Mine was up and out. I had a two hundred and eight degree arc of vision. I saw everything that happened. That's one of the reasons why so many people were inquiring of me because other people were there, but they didn't see anything because of where they, the location of their battle station.

JM: Well, to give me --- the *AVOCET* was out and she was out fast, moving down Battleship Row.

J0: Yeah, we had steam up.

JM: You had steam up?

J0: Yeah.

JM: Were you going to be going out, or . . .

J0: Well, it was --- we weren't on a cold arm watch, like a lot of the destroyers, who were tied up one to another, alongside of some big ship to tend her. You know, they were on cold arm status.

JM: Yeah.

JO: But we did a lot of moving. We were always on the go. But partial steam was always maintained. And we fired up in a hurry and because of this, my ship was only a hundred and eighty feet long, forty feet across the beam, and we were one of the few ships that actually moved around on the surface . . .

JM: Where did you go?

JO: . . . during the attack and that day, throughout the day. There were many small gigs, captain's gigs, different kinds of liberty boats, sixty footers, moving around, but we were one of the few ships. There were two tugboats, the *OSCEOLA* and one of the other the mine, the name slips my mind right now.

JM: *HOGA*?

JO: Uh-huh. Well, it turns out that we were the few ships moving. So they sent us right in, bow in against the battleships burning, exploding and we put the fires out.

JM: What was the first battleship or what was the first place that you went when you got under way?

JO: Well, we were firing from the position along the air station docks.

JM: Uh-huh.

JO: Then they told us to go alongside, bow in, while we were there, I saw the unthinkable take place. The giant battleship *OKLAHOMA* began to roll over. She capsized, belly up. Then after that, we were sent around her, bow in, against the *WEST VIRGINIA*, the *MARYLAND* and *TENNESSEE* were there, and they had all been hit. Some of them were already sitting on the bottom. And they were burning badly. *AVOCET* put fires out on *WEST VIRGINIA*. I showed you a picture of it.

JM: Yeah.

JO: Yeah, and you could see the streams of water being pumped right in, right up around the sunken and rolled over, capsized *OKLAHOMA*, *AVOCET* bow in against the battleship *WEST VIRGINIA*, and we were putting water on everything we could because we were right up and close. The brave little tugboats were right there alongside us too.

JM: Weren't you trying to also blow some of the oil apart, so the guys could swim for shore?

JO: Not at that time. Where I saw that was after the *CALIFORNIA* took several bombs, she began to have a port list and she began to settle. Then she took a couple of torpedoes on her port side. Then she settled rather rapidly. Then oil come pouring out of her tanks, and it flooded the side on our starboard side, between the battleship and the Ford Island. It was a lake of oil of almost two feet thick, a foot, two feet thick. And they abandoned ship and some of the men jumped into that. And when they come up, they couldn't penetrate it, so you could see their head, the form of their heads, and they were suffocating under a huge amount of tar like substance, which is the heavy oil that they used for the engines with. Some brave men stood there with powerful hoses, they still had pressure. They tried to make a path for them in

the water, to make it part so they could swim over to Ford Island. A lot of them didn't make it.

JM: Were you picking up survivors, or were you . . .

JO: Yeah. We --- they were being blown overboard in various places and some of them were already dead, but we couldn't tell that. We picked 'em up in various places. They had --- there were a lot of small boats out there doing that too. I saw many acts of heroism taking place that day that were never entered into the history books. You talk about Navy Cross or Medal of Honor, everybody was doing it. But nobody took time to write down your name and the fancy things you were doing, because everybody was doing heroic acts.

JM: There are key moments that really stick out in the attack and of course one of them is when the *ARIZONA* blew up. Where were you at that point?

JO: Well, we were putting water on the *WEST VIRGINIA*, and then it began to get very fierce. The other ships had been hit up the line, and their oil was floating down and it was burning fiercely with big plumes of fire boiling up, and we were right in the path of it. The winds were perfectly in their favor. And the --- we were going to get the brunt of it very quickly, and nobody was telling us to move and we were worried because you don't move unless you have orders to move. And then, suddenly they said, "AVOCET, leave your position and go across the channel," which we did, tying up to a dock directly across from the *ARIZONA*, where the oil tanks and ammunition dumps were located.

Suddenly, a dive bomber put one down her stack, and the *ARIZONA*'s ammunition magazine erupted and a giant cone of flame -- I say a thousand feet high -- and it erupted in a mushroom like cloud, ominously, precursor of what was to come four years later.

JM: What was the sound?

JO: Ah, I lost my hearing that day. Through all the reverberating and all the explosions reverberating around in this bowl like area, it was beyond description. I saw the *SHAW* blow up, when she was hit, her magazine a giant ball of flames. Guns going constantly, bombs falling and exploding. And this giant eruption from the *ARIZONA* was indescribable as far as sound. If you've ever been in a thunderstorm and you would multiply it by a thousand, or a hundred, and with giant chunks of steel flying completely across the channel, over the top of my ship, into the area where the tanks were located, and where the large warehouses were storing ammunition, the sound was indescribable. It reverberated back and forth off the mountains for long periods of time. It was like bouncing, echoing, kept bouncing and roaring over and over again. And it was so loud and the whoosh of the air, all the way across the channel, was enough to knock a man down just from the explosive, the air from it. And the gunners, the gunnery officer says, "Everybody hit the deck," bang. Joe Messner dove behind a live box, a ready box of live ammunition. And I looked to the one side and I'm looking up at the end of these shells there, and I thought, this is not a very good place to be hiding.

JM: You went up to the *ARIZONA*, didn't you, after the explosion?

JO: Well, you mean, on the --- at the time of the . . .

JM: Yeah. Did you go to the . . .

JO: Well, I was in the vicinity on many occasions, moving around. We had jobs to do.

JM: Uh-huh.

JO: And I had seen what was left of her. When she erupted, her guts was blown out and men were blown, bodies of men were flown high into the sky, like rag dolls, like dummies, falling on the water, dead on, of course. Well, I presume, because they looked --- when you see arms and legs fluttering as they fly through the air. It was more like rag dolls than human beings. But many men were blown over to the sides. As I said in the beginning, down and in. Most of the men were down and in, never had a chance to escape. Some of them might, I know did, but many of them, as you see, there are still about 1,200 remaining in the bowels of that ship out there.

JM: You were a teenager that day.

JO: Yeah, I guess . . .

JM: And you watched the rag dolls, your fellow sailors. Was it --- what was going through your head?

JO: Well, I had the presence of mind even -- I was an "A" student, I was an honor student in school. And I had the presence of mind to realize that I was involved in an earth-shaking event, historical event. I didn't think I was going to live through it because I watched too many bombs come. I looked right up, looked 'em right in the eye and they come right at me, and I made the sign of the cross. I thought surely this one has my number on it. They came from so many different directions. Then I would say, "Unto thy hands I commend my spirit." I must have did it ten times.

But it didn't happen. The bomb would fly over my head and destroy something behind me or something. And we moved among the ships and while the torpedoes and bombs are falling, not a single casualty, not even a scratch. I don't know how to tell you, how to explain this happening. We, small as we were, moved around on the dead center of the target, on the bullseye, and never received a scratch. No one, not a single injury of any kind.

JM: When you wound down the channel, the *NEVADA* was trying to get her way out and attracting a lot of attention at one point. When did they dispatch you down to get the *NEVADA*?

JO: Well, we --- what happened was that we were taking a beating with nothing happening in our favor, and suddenly two destroyers, at high speed, raced to the channel opening, followed by, I think it was the *PHOENIX*, the large heavy cruiser. They were going so fast that they were sending spray up from their bow thirty feet high, just like a motor boat. They were going, I couldn't --- maybe twenty, thirty knots, it seemed like it, anyway.

Then chugging along behind them comes the *NEVADA*, at a rather heavy port list. And we took our hats and we waved 'em, and we cheered, and we jumped up and down. At last somebody's going out to fight them! But she didn't look very healthy and she didn't get very far beyond us, as I showed you from the

pictures. Probably about a quarter of a mile from my ship, ten, at least ten Japanese dive bombers got her and none of them missed. They were very accurate. And they come down, right to the top of the towers. She had the tripod masts. And they pulled out almost in her antennas before they dropped the bombs. Before you know it, she was burning and exploding from one end to the other. Men were blown over the side again. She was a solid mass of flames. Then these two little tugboats grabbed a hold of her, because if she would have went down right there, she would have been like an iron gate, closing off the entire Pearl Harbor, just like an iron gate. But brave little old tugboats, pushed her over to what I call the pile point. Then they said, "AVOCET, go alongside *NEVADA*, put the fires out."

Then I saw something that I couldn't hardly believe, carnage. Blood running out of the scuppers as we pulled up along side. Arms and legs, headless bodies draped over the gun places. Brave Marines were firing right up 'til they were destroyed. And some men staggering around on the decks with the clothes burned off of them, skin hanging down like lace curtains. Dead men walking around that didn't even know they were dead yet, falling down. But it was --- we poured the water on 'em and we put fires out and we stayed right there, working constantly from fire hoses, nozzles from all over the ship. And while we were there, the final attack took place. High flying level bombing, V formation covered the sky. And they bombed everything that was already sunk. And since we were tied up to the *NEVADA*, a prime target, they figured, well, if they didn't get us over there, they surely going to get us over here.

JM: You came through it and first, I've two kind of follow-up questions. What did you look like? Physically, what did you look like after a day like this?

J0: Well, my hands were in very bad shape. They were bleeding because I was working so hard and tearing these things open. Our --- I was down to shreds from my throat. We were blackened by the smoke. My skin face was black, my body was black, because we were in and out of the black smoke constantly. My hands were severely damaged. Not --- I wasn't wounded, but I had worked so hard that I received a lot of scratches. My hands were bleeding from cutting open these boxes and working and doing my job. And my clothes was -- I don't know how it had become quite so tattered, but my skivvy shirt was hanging down in shreds and my body was black. And my --- I was --- I probably looked -- I was just a small fellow then. I only weighed 125 pounds and I was a short -- I mean, not short -- I was five nine and a half. I was wiry and tough. I was a gymnast in high school. But I think I probably looked like quite a mess. Eddie Reins was right there with me, we both looked like that. We were in the smoke and we were active for hours on end, and it was -- we didn't realize that, but we just did, continued to do what was asked of us.

JM: The last one, we have two minutes, though. This tape is gonna be used by researchers and people that want to learn about the attack. Not nuts and bolts, but personal, what would you want people maybe looking at this tape ten or fifty years from now to remember about you, as a person, what you saw?

J0: Well . . .

JM: Your deepest memory that day.

JO: First of all, you must remember that we were very unsophisticated teenagers in those days. Teenagers nowadays are far different than what we were. What took place was indescribable. I've tried to describe it here for you, but the stark terror, the thunderous noise, it was unbelievable. Death all around you and trying to explain, or trying to wonder how is it that I survived when so many other men died. What is the cause?-- what is the reason for such a thing? I also like to think too -- and I'd like to send a message to people -- if there never had been a Pearl Harbor, there would have never have been a Hiroshima. I want people to remember that. They started it. We finished it. But in the grand way of the American people, the generosity of the American people, put our hand out to our former enemies and said, "Now that it's over, raise up again."

And if men would lose their ideas of conquest and totalitarian rules, we wouldn't have to endure such tragic events.

JM: I want to thank you very much.

JO: My pleasure sir.

END OF INTERVIEW